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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the relationship between perceived message distortion and job satisfaction. A single hypothesis was tested: there is a positive correlation between a supervisor's job satisfaction and the extent to which he perceives messages from his subordinates as accurate. The subjects for the study were 32 first-line supervisors in the regional office of a large insurance company. The hypothesis was supported. (RB)

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THE FIRST FOUR ARTICLES in this issue provide a survey of the history and development of administrative communication. They were presented to the special interest group in organizational communication at the national meeting of the Academy of Management at Boston, August, 1973.

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This paper reports the results of a field study investigating the relationship between perceived message distortion and job satisfaction. A single hypothesis was tested: There is a positive correlation between a superior's job satisfaction and the extent to which he perceives messages from his subordinates as accurate. Both the hypothesis and interpretation of data are discussed in terms of communication as the sine qua non *of any organization.*

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MESSAGE DISTORTION AND JOB SATISFACTION—A Field Study

LYLE SUSSMAN
University of Michigan

WITHIN THE PAST DECADE the number of studies concerned with organizational communication have expanded at an ever-increasing rate. Although a number of explanations could be proposed to account for this increase, the most likely explanation is that researchers are beginning to realize that communication is the *sine qua non* of any organization.[1] Thus, by studying communication processes *within* the organization we are at the same time studying the essential characteristics *of* the organization.

Given the importance of communication to organizational performance, it is not surprising to find studies which have related specific communication behaviors to organizational effectiveness. The Purdue studies of supervisory effectiveness are examples. In these studies[2] communication correlates of effective *vs.* ineffective supervisors were isolated. That is, an effective supervisor (as defined by criteria of output, promotability, etc.) could be differentiated from an ineffective supervisor on the basis of the communication attitudes and behaviors manifested by each.

The present study is in one sense an extension of the early Purdue studies. Rather than relating communicative attitudes and/or behaviors to organizational prformance, however, this study investigated the relationship between a selected message-receiving behavior (perceived message distortion), and one's perception of his work environment (job satisfaction). Specifically, this relationship was formalized into the following research hypothesis: *There is a positive correlation between a superior's job satisfaction and the extent to which he perceives messages from his subordinates as accurate.* This hypothesis was based upon the following rationale. Regardless of the specifics of the organization, a supervisor is in a pivotal position. He depends upon accurate information from his subordinates and is in turn depended upon by *his* superior for accurate information. If a supervisor perceives that messages from his

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subordinates are inaccurate, this perception should have a detrimental effect on his perception of his pivotal position. In short, those supervisors who perceive that messages from their subordinates are accurate should have higher job satisfaction than those supervisors who perceive that messages from their subordinates are inaccurate.

Procedure

Subjects. Data were collected from 32 first-line supervisors in the regional office of a large insurance company. At the time data were collected, this number represented the total available work force at that supervisory level.[3] The span of control for the supervisors ranged from a minimum of six subordinates to a maximum of twelve subordinates. The primary responsibility of these supervisors was to direct the processing of policies and claims.

Data Gathering Instruments. The supervisors responded to two data gathering instruments. The first was the short form of the Minnesota Satisfaction Questionnaire (MSQ), designed to provide data indicative of the supervisors' job satisfaction. As described by its developers, the MSQ is composed of two distinct scales: intrinsic satisfaction scales and extrinsic satisfaction scales. Summing across the two types of scales produces an index of a subject's general job satisfaction. Thus, according to the structure of the MSQ, general job satisfaction is a composite of intrinsic and extrinsic satisfaction. The manual for the MSQ[4] presents data for both the reliability and validity of the instrument. The data indicate that the instrument is both a reliable and valid measure of job satisfaction.

The second instrument was a message booklet containing a representative sample of task-oriented messages supervisors were likely to receive from subordinates on an "average" work day. The messages were constructed in the following manner. Through observations and lists provided by the supervisors, a listing of task-related message topics was derived. These topics, applicable to the entire sample of first-line supervisors, are presented below:

1) Messages referring to the performance of a subordinate's coworker
2) Messages referring to the ordering of supplies
3) Messages referring to data-processing problems
4) Messages referring to breaks or time off
5) Messages referring to an error on a file or account
6) Messages referring to equipment breakdown

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The message booklet contained a total of 20 messages. The 20 messages were distributed across the six categories to approximate the importance of the categories as specified by the supervisors. Thus, the important topic categories (1, 3, 5) contained more messages than the unimportant topic categories (2, 4, 6). All 20 messages incorporated the following features:

1) No message contained the name of a specific person.
2) Messages were written in the unique jargon of the organization.
3) Messages referred to events that *could* happen.
4) The message recipient (supervisor) was required to make a judgment concerning the accuracy of the message. That is, the recipient could not "know" on an *a priori* basis if the message was true or false.
5) Messages referred to events over which the message sender (subordinate) could be held directly accountable.

As a means of validating the representativeness and "reality" of the messages, interviews were conducted with two personnel specialists in the organization. The specialists were familiar with the task requirements of the supervisors and agreed that the messages were in fact "real" and representative of messages supervisors were likely to receive on an average work day.

Each message in the booklet was immediately followed by a single six point, bi-polar, perceived accuracy scale. A response of "1" indicated that the supervisor perceived the message as "totally inaccurate"; a response of "6" indicated that the supervisor perceived the message as "totally accurate."

As a means of controlling the possible contaminating effects of the source dimension, supervisors were instructed to read the messages and assume that all came from their *most typical* subordinate (neither their best nor their worst). The message booklets were administered six weeks after the administration of the MSQ. Thus the possibility of measure$_{(1)}$ directly affecting measure$_{(II)}$ was controlled for by the six week duration between the two measures.

Results

A supervisor's total score for the message booklet (derived by summing across all 20 messages) was correlated with his scores on the intrinsic satisfaction scales, extrinsic satifaction scales, and general satisfaction scales. The resulting correlation coefficients are presented in the table.

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TABLE
CORRELATION COEFFICIENTS COMPUTED BETWEEN
JOB SATISFACTION SCALES AND PERCEIVED MESSAGE ACCURACY

Scale	*r value*	*sig. level*
Intrinsic	+.47	$p<.05$
Extrinsic	+.57	$p<.01$
General	+.59	$p<.01$

Thus as evidenced by the data in the table, the previously posed research hypothesis is supported. All correlation coefficients are positive, and all are statistically significant.

DISCUSSION

The primary significance of this study is that data are presented which relate job satisfaction to message receiving behaviors in organizational hierarchies. In the introduction to this paper it was argued that communication is the *sine qua non* of any organization. Far too often, however, researchers examine organizational communication in terms of a figure ground relationship. That is, researchers focus on communication (the figure) to the exclusion of organizational performance (the ground). This paper posits, however, that any study of organizational communication must relate communication behaviors to the organizational performance of those members exhibiting the behaviors. To do otherwise is to view organizational communication atomistically and without the necessary systemic orientation. In relating perceived message distortion to job satisfaction this paper *has* reinforced the systemic orientation.

This paper is also significant in that the obtained findings underscore what this author believes to be the major tenet of organizational communication: *Information is the basic raw material of any organization and organizational members may be viewed as primarily information processors. The manner in which organizational members engage in information processing is thus intimately related to their perceptions of the organizational environment and their role in it.* The obtained positive correlation between job satisfaction and perceived message accuracy supports this tenet.

It is interesting to note that the correlation was higher between perceived message accuracy and extrinsic satisfaction than between perceived message accuracy and intrinsic satisfaction. This finding may be interpreted in light of those items forming the extrinsic satisfaction scales. The items dealt with pay, promotion, supervisory competence, and praise of good work. In total, these items may be

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interpreted as representing factors associated (directly or indirectly) with success and promotion in the organizational hierarchy. Since organization members may be viewed as information processors, the relationship between perceived message accuracy and job satisfaction may be structured as follows: 1) Supervisors need information from subordinates in order to make decisions. 2) Accurate information is likely to result in decisions which are more "correct" than decisions based upon inaccurate information 3) "Correct" decisions by a supervisor are likely to result in his success and promotion in the hierarchy. Thus, if a supervisor perceives that information from his subordinates is accurate, this perception is likely to affect his perceptions of success (i.e., extrinsic satisfaction) in the hierarchy. Since all messages in the message booklets dealt with task-related matters, and hence were applicable to organizational decisions, it is reasonable to argue on the basis of the above rationale that perception of their accuracy would be more closely related to extrinsic satisfaction than intrinsic satisfaction.

In the years ahead, industrial executives will become more concerned with the attitudes their subordinates have toward their working environment. A demonstration that communicative behaviors are a correlate of these attitudes may help managers to become more concerned with the communication climates in their organizations.

Notes and References

[1] A number of organizational theorists have argued that the essence of an organization is communication. See for example Lee Thayer, *Communication and Communication Systems*, Homewood, Ill., Irwin, 1968; Herbert Simon, *Administrative Behavior*, New York, Macmillan, 1957; J. Dorsey, "A Communication Model for Administration," *Administrative Science Quarterly* 2 (1957), 309-319.

[2] See for example, Herbert W. Simons, *A Comparison of Communication Attributes and Rated Job Performance of Supervisors in a Large Commercial Enterprise*, Ph.D. dissertation, Dept. of Speech, Purdue University, 1967; Frank Funk, *Communication Attitudes of Industrial Foremen as Related to Their Rated Productivity*, Ph.D. dissertation, Dept. of Speech, Purdue University, 1956.

[3] The total number of first-line supervisors was 36. Because of incomplete data, however, 4 supervisors were not included in the final analysis.

[4] J. D. Weiss, R. J. Davis, G. W. England, and L. H. Lofquist, *Manual for the Minnesota Satisfaction Questionnaire*, Minnesota Studies in Vocational Rehabilitation, 7, Univ. of Minnesota, 1967.